SELF AND CONSCIOUSNESS
Indian Interpretations

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Aspects of Sunyata and Consciousness in Mahayana-Buddhism

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1. Introduction

The Buddha's original teaching was not the philosophical discourse but spiritual instruction. The first sermon at Sarnath does not contain any theory of consciousness. However, the underlying assumption for the Four noble truths is the theory of *karman*. The different schools of thought in India have come up with modified interpretations concerning *karman*, but it is uncertain whether the Buddha himself knew of philosophical subtleties which were implied in this concept. His was an analysis of suffering, and this analysis was based on a unique spiritual experience.

It is an other question to analyze whether the *anatta*-doctrine does necessarily belong to the earliest stock of Buddhist interpretation or not. We do not have sufficient historical evidence on earliest Buddhism, and therefore the question can be answered only by inference.[1] Whatever the answer might be, it is obvious that the whole argument concerning the Four noble truths rests on the assumption

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1. Cp. J. Perez-Remon, Self and Non-Self in Early Buddhism, Mouton (The Hague-Paris-New York), 1980.

of some theory of reincarnation. The basic contradiction in all later Buddhist thought - whether the Buddha was already aware of it or not-is *anatta* on the one side and rebirth on the other side.[2] It is-depending on the way how *anatta* is understood-a possible contradiction which is the driving force behind the development of an understanding of *vijñāna* (consciousness) which can be understood as the meta-theory which is to resolve precisely this contradiction on the grounds of a more comprehensive framework comprising both the *atta/anatta*-dilemma and the reincarnational view. Thus, the theory of consciousness is to comprise this contradiction on a higher level, and this is precisely the attempt of philosophical re-asoning in Mahāyāna-Buddhism, both in Mādhyamika and Vijnañāvada thought.

In Indian philosophies we can roughly distinguish two different perceptions of "soul" or "self" which seem to be prevalent from the very beginning as structuralizing factors concerning the later psychological or metaphysical developments, including Buddhism.[3]

1. There is a notion of "self" which is pure awareness or pure consciousness, it is a factor of knowing and luminosity without any limiting adjunct or specific content, absolutely transcendental to any real perception; it is static and beyond change. This is what the Upaniṣads refer to and is later the basis for Vedāntic philosophy, but it is also the respective principle in Saṁkhya.

2. There is a notion of "self" which has or is always a specific content, it is shaped and bears the marks of

2. This problem was seen already in earlier Buddhology in the West, cp. E. Wolff, Zur Lehre vom Bewußtsein (Vijñānavada) bei den späteren Buddhisten. Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Laṅkāvatārasūtra, Winter (Heidelberg), 1930, p. 9f.

3. Pratap Chandra, Metaphysics of Perpetual Change. The Concept of Self in Early Buddhism, Somaiya (Bombay-New Delhi), 1978, p. 190f.

individuality. It is an entity which is the very focus of individuality; it is and remains distinct from other similar entities and therefore calls for realistic pluralism in any philosophical analysis. This is obviously the basic intuition in Jainism, but also of influence to Hindu and Buddhist schools of thought.

The Buddhist concept of consciousness (*viññāṇa/vijñāna*) seems to be a concept which is trying to combine the two in so far as it is beyond the ordinary conceptual factors in being a mere capacity which depends on other factors such as the senses and sense-objects on the one hand, and a principle of continuity in change which accounts for the perpetuation of the karmic chain leading into the next rebirth, i.e. taking on the function of the *jiva* of the Jains, on the other hand. Already in early Buddhism we have the important function of this *viññāna* mentioned in many Suttas, and in later Mahāyāna developments - not only in the Vijñānavada-School - it developed into a kind of ultimate principle in general, but here always understood in relation to the basic experience of *śūnyatā* as a non-dualistic and radicalized interpretation of the early concept of anicca and anatta in their mutual relationship.

The following explanations are an attempt to rise a few points for observation concerning the basic Buddhist view.

2. Early Developments

The most distinct feature of Buddhism with regard to other Indian philosophical schools at that time is certainly the *anatta*-doctrine as stated in Saṁyutta-Nikāya III, 132: *sabbe dhammā aniccā dukkhā anattā*, which means that all formations are impermanent, miserable and without "self".

A few questions arise already with regard to this classical formula. First of all it has to be understood that obviously the conclusion: impermanence is suffering, was not at all questioned.

Why not? If we look into the earlier Vedic tradition we cannot take such a view for granted, and even in the Upaniṣads there is an implicit and explicit argument for the devaluation of what later was called the *vyāvahārika:* the *brahman-ātman*-reality was much more splendid than what the senses could grasp, ordinary reality being a mere shadow of what really is. This argument does not work for the Buddhist view, because nothing else than the *skandhas* have real being. Saṁyutta-Nikāya II, 53 just declares: *yad aniccaṁ taṁ dukkhaṁ.*

There is a reason for this implicit link, and the reason is precisely implied in the topic of this paper. The link between *anicca* and *dukkha* lies in the nature of consciousness and in the perception of *śūnyata,* which became a key concept much later, of course, but which is the implicit experience already in earliest Buddhism that allows for the unquestioned relationship between *anicca* and *dukkha.* But this we shall develop later.

Is there a kind of permanent principle in the human person or not? Concerning this question Buddhologists are as divided as the Buddhists themselves, and the whole history of the 18 schools of early Buddhism is a commentary on this unresolved problem.

Not only the Pudgalavādins tried to introduce a principle of continuity, but the Sautrāntikas even argued that it were the *skandhas* which transmigrated from one life to the other. They postulated the seeds of goodness which was some kind of incorruptible nature of Man which is the basis for that which attains Nirvāṇa. The Yogācārins worked this out into a theory of undestructible *dharmas* which are seeds in the continuous stream and so on. We could go on, but as Edward Conze says: "These 'pseudo-selves' are not easy to study, partly because there is little precise information, and partly because the concepts themselves are distinctly indefinite".[4] With regard

4. E. Conze, Buddhist Thought in India, Allen & Unwin (London), 1962, p. 132.

to Western and also recent Eastern scholarship and reception of Buddhism it is interesting to see how different ideological interests have influenced the reading (and misreading) of texts, from Schopenhauer to Rhys Davids in controversy with Kern and Stcherbatsky, or Georg Grimm versus Heinrich von Glasenapp.[5] Ananda K. Coomaraswamy tried to prove that the Buddha and Śaṅkara said the same, the Enlightened one only *via negativa*, the preceptor of Vedānta *via eminentiae*.[6] Those comparisons, I dare to suggest, are not very useful, because firstly they project later Vedāntic developments - there is a gap of more than thousand years between the Buddha and Śaṅkara and considerable Buddhist influence on his Advaita Vedānta - onto earlier history, and secondly the terms for "consciousness", "self", "person" etc. are used in an uncritical way mostly reflecting the conscious or unconscious philosophy of the interpreter than being founded on a careful analysis. Today there is a tendency to assume that the Buddha did not deny a "self" in the more comprehensive and totally transcendend sense, though he definitly negated the empirical "I" as the centre of attachment.[7] For Western Buddhists this is the articulus statis et cadentis ecclesiae as an interesting controversy in the Journal "Yana" of the "Altbuddhistische Gemeinde" in Germany (Vol.4, 1951), and also the disputed position of Christmas Humphreys[8] show.

Let us highlight some of the developments in early Buddhism. The basic insight of the Buddha is that all is universal flux, and there is nothing else. The theory of the five

5. Pratap Chandra, op. cit., p. 112ff.

6. Cp. L. de Silva, The Problem of Self in Buddhism and Christianity, The Study Centre (Colombo), 1975, p. 55f.

7. H. Nakamura, Die Grundlehren des Buddhismus, ihre Wurzeln in Geschichte und Tradition, in: Buddhismus der Gegenwart (ed. by H. Dumoulin), Herder (Freiburg), 1970, pp. 18ff.; see also M. Shimizu, Das "Selbst" im Mahāyāna-Buddhismus in Japanischer Sicht und die "Person" im Christentum im Licht des Neuen Testaments, Brill (Leiden), 1981, p. 15.

8. de Silva, op. cit., p. 60.

khandhas/skandhas wants to bring out precisely this point. They are combinations which decay as soon as they have synthesized. The aggregates, however, are. And the flux is. Thus, we have a realistic pluralism concerning the aggregates[9], and we have an unchanging formative principle with regard to the flux. All the different Buddhist schools took this as a basis to avoid both the extremes, nihilism or better total negationalism *(uccedavāda)* as well as eternalism with regard to a "substantial soul" *(sassatavāda)*. The argument against atta has had always an analytical and an ethical dimension.

But this is not all. There are sufficient scriptural passages which hint to something as coordinator of the karmic impressions, though this is definitely not an *independent* self. To give just a few examples I will come up with the famous story from the Bhārahāra-Sutta in the Saṁyutta–Nikāya, III.[10] The Buddha compares to human being with an entity bearing a burden *(bhāram)* which is the combination of the different factors of grasping. Yet, there is a bearer of the burden *(bhārahāram)* apart from the five aggregates, and this is a kind of "person" *(puggalo)* with a specific name and a distinguishable family-background. The three cravings are taking hold of the burden *(bhārādānaṁ)*, and the end of craving is the act of laying down the burden *(bhāranikkhepan)*. It is obvious that the Buddha describes the spiritual path to liberation, and there is a subject on that path. There are other "self-passages" in the Dhammapada *(160, 380)*, the Mahāparinibbāna-Sutta etc.

There is a moral transcendence of the "self" of a person who has attained liberation, a "higher self" which is beyond samsaric bondage, searched for by Mara, the enemy and temptator, and for him impossible to reach.[11]

9. Th. Stcherbatsky, The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa, Motilal Banarsidass (Delhi), 1978, II, p. 55.
10. Cp. the history of interpretation of this text in Pratap Chandra, op. cit., p. 120f.
11. An exegesis of the relevant passages is given by Perez-Remon, op. cit., p. 278ff.

Maybe more interesting is an other evidence because a good amount of probability is there that we touch on historical ground of the earliest Buddhist community: the question of suicide of a liberated being, an *arahat*. There was no question that suicide cannot bring any gain, because it is only the body which could be killed. The karmic imprints (*saṅkhāra/saṁskāra*) would remain, and more, by committing suicide one would only add two problems: a) an other and new violent act would only result in further karmic consequences, and b) a good opportunity of Dhamma-practice in this precious human birth would be wasted. But what about an *arahat* who had burnt up all Karma so that nothing could travel into the next reincarnation? Saṁyutta-Nikāya I, 120f. (Mārasaṁyutta 23) and II/III, 344 (Khandhasaṁyutta 87) reports the strange story that Māra, the personification of karmic hindrances and obstruction, moves around in a smoky cloud in order to search for the "soul" or the rebirth-consciousness of an *arahant* who had committed suicide. Naturally Māra failed to find anything, because that being was already liberated and no "karmic stuff" could be around. Yet, what the story shows is that early Buddhism obviously did not deny a certain kind of "coherent substance" which after death – i.e. independent of the aggregates – was left behind. Needless to say that the Buddha himself would never have indulged to answer the possible question what this coherent entity would be.

Rather unusual (and therefore with some historical background?) is also the story in the Mahāparinirvāṇa-Sūtra (16,1ff.)[12] which recollects the "treaty" between Buddha and Māra. Buddha had attained enlightenment, and Māra wanted to persuade him to enter Nirvāṇa immediately in order to prevent

12. E. Waldschmidt, Das Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra. Text in Sanskrit und Tibetisch, verglichen mit dem Pāli nebst einer Übersetzung der chinesischen Entsprechung im Vinaya der Mūlasarvāstivādins, Abhandlungen der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Klasse für Sprachen, Literatur und Kunst Jg. 1950, 2, Akademie-Verlag (Berlin), 1951, p. 209ff.

other beings from becoming enlightened, i.e. freed from Māra's own power and influence. The Buddha had refused but offered to enter Nirvāṇa as soon as the teaching had spread sufficiently and the Saṁgha be established firmly. Now at the end of his life in Vaiśāli Māra returns and asks the Buddha: *parinirvāhi bhagavan Parinirvāṇasamayaḥ sugatasya,* it is time, Nirvāṇa is there, may the Exalted One please enter into Parinirvāṇa. Again, this refers to a kind of continuous principle which Māra has control of if it is not liberated or transferred into an other level of existence. The motive of the "pact with the devil" is old and appears here and there in the history of religions, and Buddhism is by no means an exception. The unusual story (including Ananda's failure to change the mind of the Buddha to stay on), however, would not have entered the canon if it would not have had a strong support in the belief-system of early Buddhists.

But what then is this "entity" leaving the body after death and entering a new body or Nirvāṇa? Buddhism compares it to the flame, which in the second case is blown out. Western scholarship has often interpreted this comparison as extinguishing the existence of this "entity". But this is wrong.[13] In Majjhima-Nikāya (I, 487ff.) it is one Vacchagotta who asks the Buddha about the destiny of an Enlightened One after death. The Buddha asks the counter-question: What happens to the flame when a lamp is blown out? It is a good question, because the flame is energy which returns into a status of potentiality or a more subtle realm of reality. This is by no means a specific Buddhist interpretation, but common Indian understanding of reality. Even in Vedanta it is not a gross "substance" which travels from one life to the next, but an energy. It is not the gross form of life, but the flame of life, i.e. reality (energy) on a more subtel level of reality which is passed on, as Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad III, 2 et al. states.

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13. Pratap Chandra, op. cit., p. 125, refers to O. Schrader's famous article, 'On the Problem of Nirvāṇa, in: J.P.T.S 1904f., p. 163.

Further, on the basis of the Milindapanha the theory of *bhavanga* was developed which found its way into the Abhidamma and was taken over by Buddhaghosa. This was conceived of as a causal factor of existence, some "life-continuum"[14] between two rebirths, and this was later developed into a kind of stream-of-being-theory by Anuruddha (12th century A.D.).[15]

Hence, asking for "self" and "person" in early Buddhism we have to be aware that for them reality has many levels. There are subtle realms which present an entity as "something", but not as an independently existing reality as it is the case in the manifestation of latent energetic processes. Therefore, the Buddha's *majjhimā paṭipadā* (middle path) might not just indicate the inexpressibility of reality, but could be something like *complementarity* in present day understanding of reality.

We could go on in arguing that the world view of early Buddhism is more intelligible – neither "soul" nor "not-soul"– than often admitted. The Sautrāntikas developed their *saṁtāna*-doctrine of continuity not without reason. Here, the *vāsanas* are imprints into the continuum of consciousness which form structures, and this is the basis for later Yogācāra developments.[16] Instead of mere contact *(sparśa)* it is now coordination *(sārūpya)*, i.e. a structuralized relationship, which accounts for perception. The Sammitīyas certainly speak of some independence of a "person", and it is no doubt that the Pudgalavādins had been a strong school of thought at least right into the 7th century A.D., especially in the Northwest,[17] which would have been impossible if they could be simply accused of blatant heterodoxy (which of course was the charge of other schools which finally survived) and the question of "self" and "no-self" could be easily answered on the basis of the canon.

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14. E. Conze, op. cit., p. 132.
15. de Silva, op. cit., p. 48.
16. E. Wolff, op. cit., p. 17ff.
17. N. Dutt, Mahāyāna Buddhism, Motilal Banarsidass (Delhi), 1977.

Now we come to the crucial point. One of the central teachings of all Buddhist schools (though differently interpreted, of course) is *paticcasamuppāda/Pratītyasamutpāda*, the interdependent origination. Two links in the chain are of interest here: consciousness (*viññāṇa/vijñāna*) and individuality (*nāmarūpa*). What is this consciousness?

It is obvious that both *saṅkhāras* and *viññāṇa* are the factors carrying on in the chain of rebirths. The *saṅkhāras* are basically mental factors determining a person's character. Anguttara-Nikāya II, 157f. equates *saṅkhāra* and *sañcetanā* which is the motivation or prefiguration of a determinate or intentional action. This leads right into a specific Buddhist understanding of the relationship between volition and action which is distinct from the Jain view of *karman* as a kind of material stuff.[18] For the Buddhists action is basically a result of a mental process (*cetanā*) which directs the other aggregates. Therefore, *viññāṇa* is not just one among the other aggregates, but it can control their flux on the basis of karmic conditions and is therefore the centre for freedom which is necessary for the whole Buddhist path and finally liberation. As it is stated at the beginning of the Dhammapada: *manopubbangamā dhammā*, all is directed by the mind.

Indeed, already in early Buddhism *viññāṇa khandha* has a distinct function which in other schools of thought are attributed to some kind of self or person. This is supported by a look into Rhys Davids Pali-English Dictionary where the whole spectrum of the term is quite clear; *viññāṇa* is linked to five different sets of meanings: it is one of the aggregates (*khandha*), it is listed as an element (*dhātu*), it is one of the links in *paṭiccasamuppāda*, it is a kind of sustenance (*āhāra*) and finally refers to a body (*kāya*). There seem to be two general concepts behind it, one would be *viññāṇa* as an empirical consciousness which depends on sensations, the

18. Pratap Chandra, op. cit., pp. 188ff.

sense-organ and the sense-object, the other being a distinct and individuated *viññāṇa* which is something like a subtle body.

The first is the generally accepted basis for Buddhist epistemology and theory of perception, as it is stated concisely in Majjhima-Nikāya III, 281: *cakkhuñ capaṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuviññāṇaṁ tiṇṇaṁ sangati phasso*, based on the eye and connected with an object for seeing an eye-consciousness arises, the coincidence of the three is perception. Likewise with regard to the other senses so that we have six sense-consciousnesses, including *manoviññāṇa* which, according to Majjhima-Nikāya 1, 295, coordinates the others in such a way that it allows for a multi-sensual perception. Otherwise we would perceive different worlds of forms, sounds etc. without being able to link them. Thus, whereas the consciousnesses connected with the senses are basically passive in relying on the sense-organ as directing agent, *manoviññāṇa* is an active coordinator which we could call "subjectivity" in a certain sense, there is even a tendency to substitute it for a "self".[19] This has often been overlooked and requires explanation–what does this subjectivity imply for our interpretation of anatta?

The second concept, *viññāṇa* as an individuated subtle body, has to do with the karmic interconnection between two births. It is said that *viññāṇa* descends into the womb right at the moment of physical copulation between the parents. In the Mahanidana Sutta of Digha-Nikāya II, 63 the descent (*okkamissatha*) of *viññāṇa* is a precondition for the next link in the chain of interdependent origination which is *nāma-rūpa*. It is *nāma-rūpa* which provides a "foothold"[20] for

19. An analysis of related texts in given by Perez-Remon, op.cit., p. 61, 69, 118.

20. Pratap Chandra, op. cit., 192. However, his generalizing statement: "What *jīva* does in Jainism for the perpetuation of personality, *viññāṇa* does in early Buddhism." (p. 191), is an oversimplification.

viññāṇa, and based on the elements there is descent into the womb (*gabbhassavakkanti*), Anguttara-Nikaya 1,176. What is interesting is the difference between *nāma* which is the function of mental factors in a personality related to and depending on all the other aggregates, and *viññāṇa*, which, being a precondition in the chain, must be beyond it. Would it be possible to take *viññāṇa* as a kind of dependent factor of a different order of subtlety? It is, after all, not only Karma which transmigrates, but maybe this vinnana which is certainly not an entity of independent nature but a function or capacity, maybe an all-pervading latent energy, which comes to actualization under certain conditions and in dependence on other factors as is seen both in the theory of perception and in the theory of descent. This would also give a coherent interpretation to the stories of suicide of an arahant where a "subtle field" is being searched for.

No doubt, *viññāṇa* is not an independent self, it is empty (*śūnya*) with regard to substantial self-nature (*svabhāva*). It is a structuralizing potentiality which forms and is being formed in the process of becoming and decaying. Therefore, it is able to "carry" karmic seeds so that it can account for the necessary continuity in the chain of rebirths. Since it is not a static self, but a self related to all other factors, the question whether it is distinct in each individuality would be an abstraction.

But these are the problems discussed in the philosophical circles which later formed a kind of new paradigm in Buddhist history: Mahāyāna. The philosophical developments are by no means the only and most important factors accounting for the emergence of Mahāyāna. Social factors, cultural-religious influences, especially the emergence of bhakti-movements all over India which influenced Brahmanical culture (Bhagavad-Gītā) and Buddhism (Lotos-Sūtra) simultaneously and partly with the same effects, the necessity to bridge laity and monks, financial developments in connection with the Stūpa-worship etc.

are other points.[21] What I wanted to show is that developments in Mahāyāna, as for instance the concept of *śūnyata* (emptiness) in Mādhyamika and the notion of *ālaya-vijñāna* (store-consciousness) in Vijñānavāda are consequences and logical conclusions on the basis of early Buddhist views and interpretations.

3. Aspects in Mahayana

Early Buddhism taught selflessness with regard to the person on the basis of the intuition of *anicca*, but concerning the outside world, i.e. *khandhas* and *dhātus*, they held a realistic pluralism. These aggregates or elements did exist, though in a specific sequence of time which was accountable for uninterrupted new formation. Thus we have a realistic momentariness.

It is my impression that the fundamental paradigm shift between early Buddhism and Mahāyāna – taking place already in certain schools such as the Mahāsaṁghikas – is the refutation of this realistic pluralism, not any theory of soul or not-soul!

The Prajñāpāramitā literature, based on the cultural developments mentioned at the end of the last section and a new and deeper, to my mind also more consisting, interpretation of what was experienced in trans-rational meditative states, this literature interprets the Buddhist path to realization or liberation from an entirely transrational point of view. The key term is *śūnyatā*, which is actually more a programme or a matrix of a specific symbolic interpretation of reality (or reality as symbol) than a philosophical term with a definite or even definable meaning. This became the corner-stone for all Mahāyāna philosophy, both Mādhyamika and Yogācāra. The meaning of *śūnyata* over against the earlier and more limited *anatta* is simply that there is no limited entity which would be characterized by *svabhāva* whatsoever. There is no objective reality which is distinguished by any marks giving it an absolute identity, and in that sense (and only as such!) there is universal unreality or emptiness.

21. N. Datt, op. cit., pp. 81ff., et al.

To realize this truth is supreme enlightenment because it frees from any possible attachment – there is not anything to be attached to. The one attached and the thing being attached to are no objective realities or distinct entities, and therefore the process of attachment reveals its true nature: it is empty. This lack of inherent existence (*niḥsvabhāva*) is the core of *śūnyatā*, or expressed with regard to early Buddhist philosophy, there is not only *pudgalanairātmya* but, much more comprehensive and consequent, *dharmanairātmya*. This, once more, is the great and new insight of Mahāyāna. It sheds a completely new light on the process of liberation and its social implications, thus paving the way for a *bodhisattvayāna* based on the teaching of *tathāgatagarbha* which would be impossible without the comprehensive matrix of *śūnyatā*. It sheds new light on the understanding of reality as such, including, of course, understanding of consciousness. And this is the only point which interests us here, though we will realize that it is the fundamental point, because this new understanding of consciousness is the framework in which all the other questions are being resolved.

Before I will discuss only some points I will, however, try to give a brief survey on the different schools with regard to our topic.[22]

For all schools there is no dispute that *śūnyatā* does not mean that nothing exists. Rather, *śūnyatā*, though being without quality, means, that all, what is, exists because of a cause (different from itself in Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika) in and relation to other things and causes. Any phenomenon has actually no real origin but is empty. Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika adds, that

22. Based on Th. Stcherbatsky, Buddhist Logic Vol. I-II, Dover (New York), 1962; T.R. V. Murti, The Central Philosophy of Buddhism, Unwin Pb. (London), 1980; N. Datt, op. cit., esp. pp. 178ff.; The XIV. Dalai Lama, Universal Responsibility and the Good Heart, Library of Tibetan Works & Archives (Dharamsala), 1981, pp. 97ff. See also M. Schott, Sein als Bewußtsein. Ein Beitrag zur Mahāyāna-Philosophie, Materialien zur Kunde des Buddhismus H. 20, Winter (Heidelberg) 1935, pp. 16ff.

things are only nominally imputed by consciousness, i.e. they are not self-existent as they appear to be. But this does not mean that things do not exist.

The Self does not exist in the ordinary sense. What actually is positively accepted is different in various schools.

Yogācāra has two explanations. The self is not explained in relation to the aggregates, i.e. the form of a body etc., but only on the basis of consciousness. Now there are two views: one is to count eight consciousnesses (five sense-consciousnesses, mental consciousness, a "negative" or linking consciousness (*manas*)[23] and the fundamental consciousness -*ālaya-vijñāna*-), and this fundamental consciousness has the function of self or I; the other (earlier) view has only six levels of consciousness, and here the sixth one is that which exists as "I".

Mādhyamika also has two sub-schools: Svātantrika-Mādhyamika and Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika. In Svātantrika there again are two views (Yogācāra-Svātantrika-Mādhyamika and Sautrāntika-Svātantrika-Mādhyamika), and both accept the sixth level of consciousness as a "self" independent of body and the other consciousnesses. The argument, of course, is, that body and the consciousnesses depending on the senses perish at death, so it must be something else what is responsible for the karmic chain. Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika, however, holds that all phenomena, including different aspects or levels of consciousness, exist in mutual dependence. The "self", too, exists only in dependence both of the physical aggregates and consciousness. There-

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23. It is also called *kliṣta mano-vijñāna*, because the process of defiled intellection is always going on in it whereas *ālaya* is indeterminate objectivity. It works out the determinate categorization which is necessary for linking the *ālayavijñāna* with the six sense-consciousnesses (*pravṛtti-vijñānas*). For a detailed analysis see A.K. Chatterjee, The Yogacara Idealism, Motilāl Banarsidass (Delhi), 1975[2], p. 101ff.

fore, "I" is a mere designation referring to the process of connection between body and consciousness. Consciousness and "self", therefore, are not identical.

a) *Mādhyamika*

I will start with Candrakīrti's view of self and consciousness, because it has become the basis for later classifications and discriminations concerning mind, mental states and so on in Madhyamika, especially the Prāsaṅgika school.[24]

Candrakīrti starts from the discrimination between two different kinds of notion of self.[25] First, self can mean the person or I as a conventionally existing phenomenon which is nominally imputed onto the collection of the five mental and physical aggregates. Such a self does exist only conventionally, because it cannot be found under logical analysis as Candrakīrti explains by his Sevenfold Reasoning. Second, self can mean inherent existence or self-sufficient existence, and such a self does not exist at all, not even conventionally. This kind of self which does not exist at all is the object being negated when one meditates on the selflessness (*śūnyatā*) of persons. Thus, the emptiness of a person is its lack of inherent existence.

To be a little bit more precise it is useful to distinguish eight different meanings of self in Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika, but all of

24. Candrakīrti, Catuḥśataka, in: V. Bhattacarya, The Catuḥśataka of Āryadeva, with Extracts from the Commentary of Candrakīrti, The Indian Press (Allahabad), 1928, pp. 831ff.; H. Tauscher, Candrakīrti: Madhyamakāvatāraḥ und Madhyamakāvatārabhāsyam (Kap. VI, 166-266), Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde, H. 5: Universität Wien, 1981; Candrakīrti, Supplement to Nāgārjuna's Treatise on the Middle Way, Dharamsala ed. For the following explanations I rely also on J. Hopkins, Meditation on Emptiness, Wisdom Publ. (London), 1983.

25. J. Wilson, Chandrakīrti's Sevenfold Reasoning: Meditation on the Selflessness of Persons, Library of Tibetan Works & Archives (Dharamsala), 1980, pp. 12f.

them come under the two different types which I have explained.[26]

1. Self in terms of "I" or person (*pudgala*) as that which is being nominally imputed on the five aggregates as a kind of functioning modus concerning their collective interplay. This is, says Candrakīrti, how the self should be apprehended. The basis for imputation are the aggregates which are empty of inherent existence, and this is precisely what is being negated.

2. This self which is a referent object of a false conception because it appears to show inherent existence, does not have any existence at all. It is what is called inherent existence (*svabhāva-siddhi*) or natural existence (*svalakṣana-siddhi*). It is a subtle concept and difficult to remove, probably, because it is the root cause for attachments.

3. This notion of self conceives a person (being imputed on the aggregates) being of different character from the aggregates, because it is in control of them and not seen as dependent on them. This, says Candrakīrti, is based on a secondary intellectual reasoning once the I is imputed.

4. The self as permanent, partless and independent entity is the self referred to in other systems such as Vedānta and is negated, of course, in Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika.

5. The view of "mine" (*ātmīya*) is much debated and again subdivided. It arises as false view in dependence on the collection of aggregates regarding them or their functional occurences (feelings, actions etc.) as "mine". We could say that it is a mental substructure in the person's own continuum, an imputation on imputation, which is crucial in obstructing liberation from Saṁsāra. To quote Candrakīrti who states in his "Clear Words":[27] "That which pertains to the self is the mine; the term

26. Cp. the useful chart by Wilson, op. cit., pp. 13ff.

27. Candrakīrti, Clear Words. Commentary on Fundamental Text called "Wisdom" XVIII: 2cd, quoted acc. to Wilson, op. cit., p. 27.

refers to one's own five aggregates. The conventionally existing self is the object of the conception of an I. The mine, the aggregates and so on, are the objects of the conception of mine. Due to the pacification, i.e. the non-arising or non-observation of the true existence (of the I and mine) the yogi annihilates the conception of an I and the conception of mine".

6. The self as a mode of consciousness conceiving a "self" (ātmagrāha) of type 2–4, i.e. a "self" within the "self" having a wrong conception of reality in conceiving the same as inherently existent.

7. The self as a mode of consciousness conceiving an I in one's own continuum of consciousness which is not aware of the mechanism of imputation and is therefore wrong.

8. This conception of I and mine corresponds to a consciousness conceiving I (Nr.7). The self being negated here is a "conceiver" which is as it were the subject of "I-and-mine-arising", and it appears differently than it is in reality.

We see, the differentiation being made here is quite subtle, but all is an application of *śūnyatā* with regard to the mental process conceiving I or self on different levels or stages of reasoning. In Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika[28] both persons and all other phenomena are lacking inherent existence, i.e. they are *śūnya*. The mere I, however, exists as an imputation on the five aggregates. If they do not appear, this I cannot appear. But now comes a crucial addition: The false view of an inherently existing self which does not recognize this imputation as such, can come into being only when the aggregates are conceived as truly existing. Thus, the general insight into *śūnyatā* concerning the *dharmas* and *skandhas* is being called for ! Nevertheless, meditation on emptiness occurs always with regard to the person, because that is where clinging

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28. Der XIV. Dalai Lama, Kindness, Clarity and Insight, Snow Lion Publ. (Ithaca), 1984, pp. 162f.

and all the *kleśas* are to be removed. Or to put it in other words: "Persons, however, also lack existence as self-sufficient or substantial entities and as permanent, partless and independent selves. Phenomena other than persons are not meditated upon as being empty of these modes of existence for the simple reason that there is no innate conception of either of these two in phenomena other than persons".[29]

On this basis we do not have to comment on Candrakīrti's mode of Sevenfold Reasoning concerning selflessness in detail, yet the seven steps shall be just mentioned.[30] He compares the aggregates with the parts of a chariot and the "self" with that what is called "chariot" but does not exist independently or apart from the parts:

1. There is no chariot which is other than its parts.
2. There is no chariot which is the same as its parts.
3. There is no chariot which inherently possesses its parts.
4. There is no chariot which inherently depends on its parts.
5. There is no chariot upon which its parts are inherently dependent.
6. There is no chariot which is the mere collection of its parts.
7. There is no chariot which is the shape of its parts.

Likewise there is no self which could be found separate from the basis of designation, i.e. the aggregates. Position 6 is a refutation of the view of Svatantrik as who held that the continuum or collection of moments of the mental consciousness would be the self which takes rebirth. Position 7 is said to be directed against non-Buddhist systems of tenets.[31]

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29. Wilson, op. cit., p. 25.
30. Candrakīrti, Commentary on "A Supplement", quoted acc. to Wilson, op. cit., pp. 30ff.
31. Wilson, op. cit. p. 33.

I do not want to go into details concerning the rationality of the Prāsaṅgika system concerning our subject but shall briefly summarize the *functioning* of the argumentation with regard to the understanding of consciousness, based on the explanation given by the XIV. Dalai Lama.[32]

What actually is consciousness according to Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika? Human beings have five sense organs, thus-on the basis of the collaboration of organ, sense-consciousness and object being perceived, as explained earlier - one can see, hear, smell, taste and touch something. Now, what happens when one meditates and cuts off mental awareness from these sensual impressions, what remains? First of all, the mind gets occupied with inner imagery, memories and so on. Once the meditator has gone through this stage there might be still an awareness of present, past and future, but this also disappears with continuing purification of the process of consciousness. What remains now is a clear, undisturbed and non-dual mind. We shall come back to the notion of non-dual which is different in Prāsaṅgika and Yogācāra thought. Now, when this mind is investigated intoit is clear that it does not have any characteristic marks of form, location, origin and so on.

Thus, when consciousness is out of contact with an object it is empty like a vast limitless ocean. But as soon as it comes in contact with an object it gets an experience or reflection of the same, it is, as it were, shaped (passive) by the qualities of objects and reflects them (active), like a mirror, which is what it is, but reflects immediately the image put in front of it. Thus, the true nature of consciousness comprises both, getting a clear knowledge about any given object and reflecting that experience to the one who experiences the object. Now, is this vast or limitless emptiness the true

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32. The XIV Dalai Lama, Universal Responsibility and the Good Heart, op. cit., pp. 53ff.

nature of consciousness? No. Because what has been said so far was an analysis of the function of consciousness only when it is related to a concrete experience. This, therefore, is an understanding of the relative nature of consciousness. There are more levels and aspects to be taken into account, however.

If you take all the attributes and aspects of consciousness you come from level to level, from mode to mode. All composed things, however, are impermanent. Since consciousness has levels, modes etc. it is composed, therefore impermanent. This impermanence is one of the aspects of its nature.

Consciousness depends on factors like anything composed. Only on the superficial level it appears as a self-existing entity. But it is also not a mere designation, as shown above. Any moment of consciousness is depending on a former moment of consciousness. But more, it is also depending on the conditions for its arising, as explained by Candrakīrti. To be not independently existing, therefore, is the true nature of consciousness, it is the ultimate nature of the self.

So you have two levels: the ultimate nature of consciousness and the knowledge of this ultimate nature of consciousness. The first one is the basis, and the second its attribute. Consciousness or self is the basis – being not independently existing –, and all possible modes of consciousness are its attributes. But basis and attributes are of one and the same nature: Consciousness which is not inherently existing and its nature, emptiness with regard to inherent existence, are one and the same. Emptiness penetrates everything as its true nature.

If we regard consciousness as subject and the final nature of consciousness as its object we can comprehend the ultimate nature of consciousness properly. This is thedirect experience of emptiness as direct and non-dual experience of consciousness.

The result is that greed, hatred and all other *kleśas* are eradicated, because they depend on the duality of grasper and grasped.

For Candrakīrti,[33] and consequently in Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika, non-duality means *prajñā* which is free from both the extremes of the view of permanence and the view of annihilation. Thus, it is an other word for the epistemological principle of *mādhyamika* and not an ontological or psychological description of the nature of reality concerning the duality of matter and consciousness. This is precisely the basic point of difference between Prāsaṅgika and Yogācāra-Svātantrika-Mādhyamika but mainly between Prāsaṅgika and Yogācāra/Cittamātra.

b) *Yogācāra*

With regard to the Laṅkāvatāra-Sūtra D.T. Suzuki[34] has observed that three terms refer to the same reality of the deepest level of consciousness from different angles and on different historical background : 1. *citta*, which from the very beginning of Buddhist history of thought was related to the theory of perception and functions of the mind, 2. *ālayavijñāna*, which is the most comprehensive psychological term in relation to the *vijñāna*-tradition, 3. *tathāgata-garbha*, which is a religious term referring to the possibility of liberation for everybody.

Citta in a general sense refers to all possible mental processes, but in a specific sense it is different from *manas* and the *vijñānas* of the different senses. They signify specific functions, whereas *citta* is the "principle of unification by which all the activities are understood as issuing from one centre".[35] *Manas*,

33. Candrakīrti, Supplement to Nāgārjuna's Treatise on the Middle Way, quoted acc. to Wilson, op. cit., pp. 4f. note 5.

34. D.T. Suzuki, Studies in the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra, Routledge (London), 1930, p. 254.

35. Suzuki, op. cit., p. 248.

however, develops within the *citta*, and it has two functions, (a) it reflects (*manyati*) on *citta* and (b) makes *citta* see itself as object (*vidīyate*). During this process of differentiation within the one *citta* the karmic seeds (*bīja*), stored up nowhere else than in the *citta* (and in this connection usually called *ālayavijñāna*), get actualized. The Laṅkāvatārs Sūtra puts it this way: *cittena cīyate karma...*, Karma is accumulated by consciousness and structuralized by the analytical function of consciousness - *jñānena ca vidhīyate*.[36] The result is that *citta* gets "enveloped" by the cloud of *vāsanā*-formations which Suzuki calls very appropriately "habitenergies".

In early Buddhism these *caittas* or *cetasikas* were really distinct realities besides the contentless *citta*. In Yogācāra they are just phases in the process of consciousness which explicates the implicate complexity of the one citta. Therefore, in early Buddhism one moment of consciousness is the combination of *citta* and the accompanying *caittas*, whereas in Yogācāra one moment of consciousness is only one phase of the *citta* though differentiating different aspects of its own.[37]

There are a view beautiful passages in the Laṅkāvatāra, and I quote according to Suzuki (p.256f.): "The Citta is in its original naturel pure, but the Manas and others are not, and by them various karmas are accumulated, and as the result there are two sorts of impurities". (754) "On account of external defilements from the beginningless past the pure self is contaminated: it is like a soiled garment which can be cleansed". (755) "As an unintelligent man seeks for the abode of sweet sound in the body of the lute, conch-shell, or kettle-drum, so does he look for a soul within the Skandhas". (757) This passage makes it quite clear that the pure *citta* is not to be misunderstood as a kind of self or substance or individual reality *besides* anything else.

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36. Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra, 158-3, quoted acc. to Suzuki, op. cit., p. 401.

37. A.K. Chatterjee, op. cit., p. 113.

The *citta* now becomes obscure. Hence, the citta is full of phenomena and experience of past karmic events, and all what is a possible phenomenon of experience is nowhere else than in this citta, in fact, it is citta. Even the *dhātus* do not exist apart from it i.e. they are empty of inherent existence, as the Laṅkāvatāra explicitely mentions in Sagāthakam 20. Cittamātra therefore means the ground of all differentiation which is beyond phenomenal reality, and that is why *cittaṁ hi sarvaṁ*, as Sagāthakam 134 has it. But when this ground (*citta*) evolves (*pravartate*), all forms come into (dependent) being.

Thus, what is stated here is a radical ontological non-dualism. All forms, energies, formative energies, subtle realities or gross matter is nothing but explication of an implicate potentiality.

This, of course, is possible only on the basis of *śūnyatā* which can unify all different aspects and levels of reality because it allows for their mutual interpenetration. This, in turn, is not just an ontological or epistemological device, but a soteriological instrument in order to bridge not only the different worlds of *saṁsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, but the defiled and undefiled consciousness.[38] This, again, is the great insight in Mahāyāna underlying all schools.

The much disputed *ālayavijñāna* is no "self" in the sense of an inherently existing entity at all. It is precisely this ground

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38. Garma C.C. Chang puts it very well: "It is because of Śūnyatā that the merging or dissolving of all dualities is made possible. This we have seen in the discussion of the Not-Two Dharma Principle (or the Dharma-gate of non-duality) mentioned before in the Vimalakīrti Sūtra. Without Śūnyatā, the unification of Saṁsāra and Nirvāṇa, the merging of the finite and infinity, and the interpenetration and mutual containment of all beings on all levels would not be possible . . . without the realization of Emptiness, the infinite compassion and altruistic deeds of a Bodhisattva are not possible . . . The way to Buddhahood is to do all good deeds with a spirit imbued with Thorough Emptiness, free from all attachment". (The Buddhist Teaching of Totality, Allen & Unwin (London), 1972, p. 116f).

of potentiality, depending on everything else. It is one of the *vijñānas*, though the most fundamental one in so far as it stores all the karmic impressions of the past. It forms, as it were, the matrix for the functioning of all the other processes of consciousness. But in the Laṅkāvatāra it is identified with the *Tathāgata-garbha* as the original and pure nature, the suchness of reality dormant in every being. No wonder that Mahāmati got confused and asked the Buddha whether this is not a permanent self, very much like the *ātman*. And here is the Buddha's answer: "O Mahāmati, the doctrine of the *ātman* by the philosophers is not the same as my teaching of the *tathāgata-garbha*. For what the Tathāgatas teach is emptiness (*śūnyatā*), limit of reality (*bhūtakoṭi*), Nirvāṇa, no-birth, no-appearance, no-desire (*apraṇihita*), and such other conceptions, with which the *tathāgata-garbha* is characterised, and by which the ignorant are saved from the occasion of cherishing a sense of fear about the Buddhist teaching of non-ego . . .".[39]

The *vijñānas* depend on the *ālayavijñāna*, and they in turn mistake phenomena for independently existing "things" instead of realizing that they all are projections of different levels of citta. But when all the karmic seeds in the *ālaya* are stilled and eradicated, emptiness appears. In other words: non-duality arises as soon as the discriminating factors within citta disappear.

This is an extremely brief attempt to characterize the nature of consciousness in Yogācāra thought, all subtleties being neglected here. I doubt that it is useful to call *cittamātra* a form of idealism, as Suzuki does. Why? First because of the history of Yogācāra thought. It is rather well established, that Vasubandhu in his Triṁśatikā does not speak about a cosmic consciousness, but about the appearance of things in an individual consciousness, i.e. in their subjectivity (*ātman*)

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39. Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra, quoted acc. to Suzuki, p. 259f.

and their objectivity (*dharma*) both of which are only mental constructs.[40] Though this, of course, is different in later Yogācāra, it is the background of philosophical debate. But second with regard to fully developed Yogācāra: because of the emptiness of citta. This is consciousness in Yogācāra: an infinite continuum which has the potential of self-differentiation, but in itself, at its deepest level it is absolutely quiet and non-dual. All what happens, happens within this self-differentiation. But even this ground or deepest level is "nothing", it is empty of inherent existence, pure process, one could say.

What matters is not to hold a view of self or no-self. Even a "view of no-self" can become a fixed notion, a substantialized mental phenomenon, and thus turn into what Mahāyāna calls "inherent existence" or self! Emptiness also must be emptied. What remains is the continuous process of emptying. This is the nature or better the adventure of consciousness, its final ground which is no-ground, of course.

4. Conclusion

I will not try a synthesis here, much less a critical examination of the question how to proceed under a cross-cultural perspective. I just would like to summarize a few basic distinctions which are essential for an understanding of consciousness in the context of *śūnyatā* in Mahāyāna-Buddhism without investigating the basic difference between Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika and Yogācāra concerning the subtle dualism (of mind and matter) of the first one and the radical non-dual *cittamātra*-doctrine of the second one. My attempt is to show the implications of the whole discussion for our mental training on the basis of an understanding of the different levels of consciousness as presented in Mahāyāna.

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40. Cp. the excellent study of Triṁśatikā by Th. A. Kochumuttom in his: A Buddhist Doctrine of Experience, Motilal Banarsidass (Delhi), 1982, esp. pp. 170ff.

1. The core of all Buddhist philosophy is the study of consciousness, because it is consciousness which is accountable for all actions, emotions and thoughts which are to be purified in order to attain liberation. Whatever consciousness is defined to be, all philosophical endeavour has this soteriological motivation.

2. Consciousness is the fundamental reality, a beginningless and endless continuum of processes. Buddhism refers to this continnum both in logical analysis and in direct meditative perception. Consciousness cannot originate from nothing nor from matter, and therefore its source is a former moment of consciousness. This is an important argument used to establish the rationality of belief in rebirth.

3. Some Sūtras compare the ground of consciousness (*citta*) with an ocean and the different mental states or processes in consciousness (*caitta*) with the ripples on the surface of the ocean. In Yogācāra *citta* is the one reality or a universal consciousness in which all processes emerge and, after their disappearance, leave formative traces (*bīja*) for further processes. Even in what we call matter this conscious principle is latent, and the development of this conscious principle towards full maturity, which is Buddhahood, is the evolutionary process in Buddhism. In Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika, however, there is always an extremely subtle duality of most subtle mind (in Tibetan *'od gsal*, the clear light) and most subtle matter, which is its supporting energy (*prāṇa, rlung*).

4. The essential nature of consciousness is its emptiness with regard to inherent existence (*śūnyatā*), it is pure potentiality as process of its own luminosity and faculty of knowing. The most subtle level of this continuum is undestructible and lasting from birth to birth, being completely purified right into Buddhahood.

5. Consciousness is not only a store for information resulting from karmic processes, but it is the active process of knowing. Here, one differentiates between attentiveness (*buddhi*) and knowledge (*jñāna*). Only by intensification and purification of consciousness attentiveness can become so undivided and knowledge so clear that the ultimate nature of consciousness can be perceived directly. The purification is essentially an eradication of the *kleśas* which produce karmic defilments of which the most fundamental one is the false notion of a substantial self as an entity of its own (*svabhāva*). This "self" tries to establish its wrong identity by all sorts of clinging and therefore intensifies the illusion of its existence by further illusion, greed and hatred. What is the problem of beings, therefore, is the wrong perception of an absoluteness of differentiated or individuated reality.

6. What is perceived in the direct perception of consciousness by a purified consciousness? The ultimate emptiness of consciousness is perceived, i.e. the most subtle level of the continuum of consciousness which has no limiting determinations whatsoever. It is no substance, but pure light beyond any conceptual perception and duality. It has no beginning and no end. It is always present in all beings. It is their ultimate nature.

7. From a theistic point of view the Buddhist philosophy of consciousness and emptiness allows a more comprehensive view of the person. What later was developed by East-Asian Buddhism with its doctrine of mutual interpenetration of all phenomena (based on the Avataṁsaka-Sūtra) has relevance today for a unified world-view. The basic question is not self or no-self, but on a more comprehensive level: fragmentation or unity of reality.